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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 DAMASCUS 000821

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/ELA  
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TAGS: PREL PGOV KPAL UK IZ LE IR SY

SUBJECT: UK FOREIGN SECRETARY MILIBAND'S NOV. 17-18 TRIP TO  
DAMASCUS

REF: LONDON 2755

Classified By: Classified by CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 b and d

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¶1. (S/NF) Summary: UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband urged Syrian President Bashar Asad and FM Walid Muallim to take positive steps now on Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, and indirect Syrian-Israeli peace talks. Doing so would help shape coming regional political changes and provide the next U.S. administration with a strong reason to engage, argued Miliband. Asad and Muallim objected to the alleged October 26 U.S. military operation at Abu Kamal and expressed reluctance to go further than Syria had gone already in Lebanon and in Syria's indirect talks with Israel. In response to Miliband's comments on Syria's damaging relationships with Hamas, Hizballah, and Iran, Asad and Muallim defended the right of legitimate resistance against Israeli occupation, arguing a deal on the Golan would remove Syria's principle motive for maintaining relations with these actors. Asad and Muallim also pushed Miliband to urge changes in U.S. policy "in a language Washington understands." Miliband's visit provided a modest SARG propaganda boost for little in exchange. End Summary

¶2. (S/NF) UK Embassy DCM Irfan Saddiq and later UK Ambassador Collis briefed us November 19 on Miliband's stop in Damascus, the first UK cabinet-level official visit to Syria since 2001. Miliband was making his first trip to Damascus and holding his first meeting with Asad. He had met Muallim five times in the last 18 months (two on the margins of UNGA, two on the margins of Iraq Neighbors Conference gatherings, and during Muallim's October 27-28 visit to London.) Prior to his stop in Damascus, Miliband had been to Israel and the Palestinian territories and would be headed to Beirut before returning to London. Miliband's entourage included FCO A/S NEA-equivalent John Jenkins, a press adviser, a Labour Party political advisor, and two other assistants. Contrary to press reports, there were no intelligence or security officials on the manifest (head of the British Secret Service was here a couple of weeks ago and met with GID chief Ali Mamluk.) Jenkins planned to travel to Washington later in the week or early next and would seek to brief A/S Welch, according to Saddiq.

¶3. (C) Miliband arrived 1845 November 17 and departed 1640 November 18. After a tour of the Old City, Miliband had dinner and a private one-on-one with Muallim November 17. On November 18, he held meetings with Asad that included a 45-minute one-on-one session. Afterwards, Miliband joined Muallim for a joint press conference and met with a group of religious officials, including the Muftis of Syria, Damascus, and Aleppo. He also had a roundtable with a group of Syrian opinion makers and met Syrian youth exchange program participants.

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Miliband to SARG: Take Positive Steps Now  
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¶4. (S/NF) The Foreign Secretary's central message was political change would be coming in the region (elections in Israel, Lebanon, and Iran) and globally (new U.S. administration taking office January 20). Syria should not wait to position itself favorably and would benefit from better relations with the next U.S. administration if it made moves now toward comprehensive peace, better relations with Iraq, following up with Lebanon, and playing a positive role with Iran. The SARG needed to focus on creating momentum to capitalize on any changes that might be coming in Washington and should understand that any actions it took now will be seen as directed toward the new administration, not the old one.

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Comprehensive Peace

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¶5. (S/NF) Miliband pressed Asad to agree to holding a fifth round of indirect talks with Israel, to support a re-packaging and new presentation of the Arab League peace initiative, and to support Palestinian reconciliation and talks with Israel. Muallim's November 17 response started with a 45-minute history lesson8 on Israeli obstruction, failed U.S. policies to isolate Syria, and missed opportunities to heed Syrian foresight. Asad argued the following day that Syria had negotiated 10 years with Israel over the Golan, only to see the talks fail because the two sides could not agree on final borders. Syria wanted to avoid this fate again and wanted to reach agreement on the line of withdrawal before proceeding with direct negotiations. Thus far, Israel had not replied to Syria's six points. Moreover, the current Israeli government was on its way out and could not make commitments that would stick.

¶6. (S/NF) Regarding re-launching of the Arab League peace initiative, Bashar demurred, noting the Israelis had not responded seriously to the original. (Bashar reportedly &made noises8 about the Saudis as the originators of the proposal, and the UK side understood that a re-launch involving working with the Saudis was unpalatable.) During the discussions, the Syrians repeatedly emphasized their focus on the return of all of the Golan, for which they implicitly recognized they would have to give something in return. Muallim noted that Syria maintained relations with Hamas, Hizballah, and Iran as a function of its national interests central to which was the return of Syrian land. Once that goal was achieved, Syria's relations with other parties could be susceptible to change.

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Iraq/CT Issues  
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¶7. (S/NF) Miliband opened by asking why the SARG continued to refer to the "resistance" and the "occupation" in Iraq, despite the exchange of ambassadors and other areas of cooperation. Receiving no answer, he observed that the

Status of Forces Agreement provided Syria an opportunity to change its rhetoric on Iraq to a more constructive language. He said he had received positive readouts on Iraqi FM Zebari's visit to Damascus and the SARG's decision to host the Border Security Working Group as scheduled (November 22-23). He asked Asad to move forward with sending PM Otri to Iraq and take advantage of the positive mood opened up by the Council of Ministers approval of the SOFA. Bashar reportedly complained about the October 26 U.S. military operation at Abu Kamal. Miliband replied the U.S. had hit known FF facilitator Abu Ghadiyah. What Syria needed to do was to cooperate with the U.S. and West. Miliband asked why Syria had not taken action against Abu Ghadiya when the U.S. had provided a lot of information regarding his presence in Syria. "Even if Abu Ghadiya was there (in Abu Kamal)," the U.S. strike was not the way to deal with the issue, replied Asad.

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Iran  
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¶8. (S/NF) Miliband briefed Asad on the UK and West's view that Iran's nuclear program appeared to have no civilian application. Miliband's impression was that Bashar and his advisors were not fluent in the substantive details of the issue. Asad did not respond with a flat rejection of Western allegations as he had done previously, noting only that the standoff with Iran was compounded by Tehran's lack of trust. The Foreign Secretary offered to provide a more substantive briefing for Muallim and Asad (probably by FCO political director) in the next 30 days so that Syrian officials had a better grasp of Western concerns by the time former Iranian negotiator Larajani is scheduled to visit Damascus.

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Lebanon/Hizballah  
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¶9. (C) The Foreign Secretary complimented Syria's move to establish diplomatic relations and urged Syria to take advantage of the new relationship to address the issue of Hizballah's arms. Muallim and Asad argued Hizballah was a political actor in Lebanon. While not directly acknowledging Syria's role in funneling arms to Hizballah, Asad stressed the importance of Hizballah's legitimate resistance to Israeli occupation. Hizballah's arms could only be addressed in the context of comprehensive peace, Asad maintained.

¶10. (C) On the subject of relations between Lebanon and Syria, Asad said Syria was happy to work with President Suleiman and would even work with Sa'ad Hariri, should he be elected Prime Minister. He minimized the importance of diplomatic relations to the Syrian and Lebanese populations, since the existence of ambassadors (Syria's is not yet selected) and embassies would not change the normal interaction between the two countries. Asad warned, however, that he viewed Lebanon as a "detonator," where civil war could break out in a day, and in that context he remained worried about north Lebanon.

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Hamas/Palestinian Track  
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¶11. (C) Miliband urged Muallim to push Hamas toward preventing another outbreak of violence in Gaza and working with the PA. Muallim defended Hamas as a legitimate Palestinian party that held a majority of parliamentary seats and was facing a humanitarian blockade of Gaza. The current surge of violence in Gaza had begun with Israeli military actions and Hamas had no choice but to defend itself. Syria

had done its best to facilitate reconciliation, but the PA seemed determined to block this process. Miliband advised Asad that each rocket that entered Israel from Gaza increased support for Benjamin Netanyahu and the hard liners in Israel.

After the meetings, Muallim called Miliband to say he had called Khalid Mesha'al to talk about ending the rocket attacks. Mesha'al reportedly responded Hamas would do so, if Israel ceased "assassination squads" and "ended the blockade" of Gaza.

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Human Rights  
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¶12. (C) Referring to their previous discussions, Miliband told Muallim that HMG remained concerned about human rights issues in Syria. The SARG's decision to sentenced Damascus Declaration leaders to prison had prompted strong objections by the EU, U.S., and other countries. Asad replied he did not want to see these leaders sentenced to jail, but they had challenged the regime's authority and he was under pressure from public opinion to respond.

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The American School  
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¶13. (C) Miliband expressed his disagreement with the SARG's decision to close DCS. Bashar replied, "I'm a civilized man...I didn't want to close the school." Asad explained he was under severe pressure from Syrian public opinion to respond to the October 26 Abu Kamal raid. He could have recalled Syria's Ambassador to the U.S. or PNG'd the American Charge in Damascus, but he wanted to avoid harming bilateral relations irrevocably. Closing the school was not an irreversible step, said Asad, and the regime might look at trying to do something to reverse this order. Subsequently, Muallim told the UK Ambassador that he hoped to

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receive a proposal regarding the establishment of a new international school from local diplomats as early as November 20.

¶14. (S/NF) Comment: The UK Embassy here frames Miliband's visit as the product of a gradual process of engagement that has led to an opportunity to share frank views with the Syrian regime at a critical moment. Miliband reportedly left Syria with no illusions of any sudden breakthroughs. The trip nonetheless reaffirmed his belief that Syria is an important regional player that can sway to help regional peace initiatives. While Miliband delivered the right messages, Bashar and his regime appear content to wait until the new U.S. administration takes office before making any strategic decisions. Even then, it would be uncharacteristic of the SARG to make any commitments before seeing what the other side would be willing to give up front.

CONNELLY